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## Over the Steppes;

Or, **ADRIFT IN ASIA WITH  
FRANK READE, JR.**

By "NONAME."



The Pilot had risen a few hundred feet over the brow of the cliff when a startling and unlooked for thing occurred. Suddenly the blended report of rifles was heard. Bullets came rattling against the air-ship's hull. It was a close call for Beals, who was at the rail.

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# OVER THE STEPPES;

OR,

## Adrift in Asia With Frank Reade, Jr.

### A STORY OF AERIAL TRAVEL.

By "NONAME,"

Author of "The Weird Island," "The Transient Lake," "The Lost Caravan," "The Sunken Isthmus," etc., etc.

#### CHAPTER I.

##### THE LOST BICYCLISTS.

An American newspaper had just printed a thrilling report concerning the supposed fate of two boy bicyclists who had started to travel around the world on wheels. As literally rendered the paragraph was as follows:

"News has at last reached the American Consul at Constantinople of the possible fate of the two boy bicyclists, who left New York last November to tour the world, and were last heard of at Zeitoun in Armenia.

"Harold Wyman and Sam Bent are the sons of wealthy families in this city, and started upon the great trip well provided with money and credit. They left Zeitoun on the 19th of June after having mapped out a route which was to take them through Kurdestan and across the Great Steppes. They secured a guide named Beni Berber, who, however, is now known to have been a rascal, and who is probably responsible for the fate of the boys.

"Scouts sent into Kurdestan report having traced the course of the bicyclists to the Hills of Allah, just in the verge of the region of steppes. Here all trace is lost. Naturally, the friends of the two boys are frantic, and they have offered a reward of fifty thousand dollars for positive proof of their fate or their recovery, dead or alive.

"The clews so far obtained are due to the wonderful work of the shrewdest detective in America—Jackson Beals, of New York—who is still at work on the case. Further particulars are awaited with interest."

This startling report was read by many thousands of people, and among them was one who was known well as one of the most distinguished of the world's celebrities.

He was a very young man too, and lived in a small city which owed its founding to his ancestors. His name was Frank Reade, Jr., of Readestown.

He is too well known to merit more than a slight introduction. As the inventor of many wonderful vehicles and submarine boats and the air-ship, he has gained world wide fame.

The moment Frank Reade, Jr., saw the newspaper account of the lost bicyclists he was interested. He at once pulled down a chart of Asia and began studying it. At the moment he was in his office at the machine works in Readestown.

While thus engaged the door opened and a comical darky, as black as a coal, stood on the threshold.

"Beg yo' pardon, Marse Frank."

"Well, Pomp," said the young inventor, "what is it?"

"A gemmen sent up his kyard, sah; wouldn't take no fo' an answer. Got to see yo' fo' it am a question ob life an' death."

"Eh?" exclaimed Frank.

He looked at the card.

Then he said:

"Mr. Jackson Beals, detective. Humph! Show him right in, Pomp!"

The darky grinned and ducked his head.

"A'right, sah!"

A moment later a tall, spare featured, keen looking man stood in the presence of the young inventor. He bowed gravely and said:

"I am glad to meet you, Mr. Reade."

"The same, Mr. Beals."

"I have come to see you upon a very important matter."

"Very well, sir."

Frank indicated a chair, into which the detective sank. For a moment there was silence. The two men regarded each other studiously.

"My name and calling is on that card," declared Beals. "The matter which I have to broach to you, you are no doubt already familiar with."

"Yes?"

"It concerns the two boy bicyclists who left New York last November to tour the world."

"I guessed as much," said Frank, with a bow. "I have read the newspapers, and saw you were connected with the case."

"Then nothing more need be said on that subject."

"No—but in what manner can I serve you?"

The detective drew a map from an inner pocket and spread it upon the table. It was a map of Asia.

"Here," he said, putting his finger on a certain spot, "this is about the locality where the boys disappeared. Now I find that it is impossible for any American rescue party to attempt to penetrate that region. They could never come out alive."

"Well?" asked Frank, quietly.

"That is if they entered the region in the ordinary way. It is infested with a cut-throat brotherhood worse than the Forty Thieves of Ali Baba. Even the Sultan can do nothing!"

"Then the fate of our two unfortunate countrymen would seem sealed?" said Frank.

"Yes, unless—"

"What?"

"Some unusual way can be devised for invading that region and effecting the rescue."

The two men understood each other now. Frank knew perfectly well what the mission of the detective was. But he said:

"How do you know that the boys are yet alive? They may have been massacred."

"That is true enough. I am acting upon the assumption that they are alive."

"Well," said Frank, proffering the other a cigar, "let us understand one another. You have an idea that I can help you to rescue these imperiled lads!"

"Exactly!"

"In what manner?"

"You have an air ship!"

Frank lit his cigar.

"Yes!" he replied.

"That explains all. With the aid of yourself and your air-ship I believe the boys can be saved. You are aware that a large reward, \$50,000, is offered. That I will share with you fairly."

The detective fixed his keen and burning gaze upon Frank. It was a moment of suspense.

"I do not care for the reward," replied Frank. "I have money enough for all my needs."

The detective's face fell.

"But in the interests of humanity, Mr. Reade. You are a generous man. Human life hangs in the balance. I believe you are the only man in the world who can save those boys."

These words had a telling effect upon Frank Reade, Jr. as could be seen. He hesitated a moment and then rising, paced the floor.

"I have for some time meditated taking a voyage aboard the Sky Pilot," he said. "And I am not averse to the idea of a flight over Asia."

Beals' eyes glistened.

"Good!" he cried, eagerly. "I knew you would come to terms. We shall surely succeed. And I would beg that you would at least claim enough of the reward to sufficiently indemnify yourself."

"Enough of that," said Frank, curtly. "I want no part of the reward. However, I am much interested in the affair and will agree to do all I can to effect the rescue. Is not that fair?"

"It is more than fair," cried Beals fulsomely; "it is nobly generous and justifies all that I have heard of you as a philanthropist, Mr. Reade. When shall we start?"

"The Sky Pilot is now in readiness for a cruise. We need not waste more than two days in preparation."

"I will be ready in half that time," cried Beals.

"Very good," said Frank, who had now entered wholly into the spirit of the thing; "the compact is made. We will undertake the rescue of Harold Wyman and Sam Bent. Be on hand Thursday morning before ten."

"I will."

Frank touched a bell and in response the door flew open and a jolly little Irishman with flaming red hair stood in the doorway.

"Barney," said Frank, "the Sky Pilot is to sail upon a voyage over the steppes. We must have all in readiness to leave here Thursday morning. You and Pomp must see that all is ready."

"Begorra, we'll do that, sor," cried Barney, ducking his head. "An' it's glad I am to be off once more. May we have luck, Misther Frank."

The Celt disappeared to do Frank's bidding. The detective hesitated a moment.

Frank looked up inquiringly.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Reade," said the detective, "but I have a certain curiosity to take a look at the aerial vessel in which we shall sail so soon. May I be permitted?"

"Certainly," replied Frank, readily. "I will be pleased to show you the air ship; come this way."

The detective followed, and they passed through a corridor, which presently led out into a great high-roofed building, with wide doors opening into a great yard beyond.

Here, upon its stocks, rested the new air ship.

As the detective's gaze rested for the first time upon the Sky Pilot, he was much impressed. It far exceeded his expectations.

"By jingo," he exclaimed, "she is a beauty!"

Frank laughed at his earnestness.

"That is what they all say," he declared. "As for myself, to be modest, I am very well satisfied with the Pilot."

Frank took his visitor aboard the air-ship and showed him all its workings. The detective was delighted.

The Sky Pilot was in shape of hull not unlike a type of monitor. The hull was of aluminum and steel and bullet proof.

She was built narrow and rakish, and her deck was nearly all occupied with a long cabin. This cabin was provided with broad, plate-glass windows, and was furnished luxuriously.

Four steel revolving masts rose from the deck, and upon each was a huge and powerful rotoscope which furnished the power of ascension. These were driven by marvelous electric engines placed in the hold of the ship.

Forward was a pilot-house with an electric keyboard. Here the pilot could operate and guide the air-ship with the greatest of ease by pressing any of a number of buttons as required. The ship could be made to shoot upwards, or sink, go forwards or back by the simple manipulation of the little levers and push-buttons on this table.

## CHAPTER II.

### BOUND FOR THE STEPPES.

ELECTRICITY was the motive power of the air ship. This was gained by placing storage batteries aboard, the construction of which was Frank Reade, Jr.'s secret.

A powerful search-light on the main deck made travel by night one of the possibilities. A huge propeller at the stern gave motive power.

The interior of the air ship was a wonderful spectacle. So richly was the cabin furnished, so well provided with necessities and luxuries that nothing seemed wanting.

The hold contained the electric engines and batteries. Then there was the after cabin with the storerooms, the galley and the dining saloon. All were finely appointed.

Much time might be consumed in minor description. This let us weave in the course of the story.

The detective was more than delighted, as well as wonderstruck, at this evident triumph of the inventor's brain.

He could hardly find words with which to express his admiration.

"And you are sure," he asked, "that this air-ship will stand the strain of so long a voyage?"

"Certainly," replied Frank. "Do you see any structural weakness?"

"Not a bit. But it is a tremendous distance to the steppes of Asia."

"That is true. But the Pilot was constructed with just such a voyage in view."

"Good! I am glad that you have consented to co-operate with me, Mr. Reade. I feel sure now of success, and shall hope to return Wyman and Bent to their friends in due course of time."

"We will do all we can," agreed Frank.

"No one can ask more," replied Beals earnestly. "And I will rejoin you on Thursday equipped for the start."

"Very well."

A short while later Beals was on the night train whirling back to New York. Of course the first person he met upon reaching that city was the irrepressible reporter.

The result was that all the morning papers came out with a thrilling account of the projected relief trip for the lost bicycle boys.

The excitement all over the country was intense.

Before Thursday came Frank was flooded with letters and telegrams without number. Some were from sympathetic friends of the boys, or philanthropists expressing approbation, but many were from all classes of cranks with strange requests and even dire threats.

To all of these, of course, Frank paid no attention.

He consigned them to the waste basket, and went on with his arrangements for his wonderful trip.

These were soon made. Barney and Pomp worked like heroes.

While Frank studied the situation and undertaking thoroughly, he knew that it was no light affair.

Daily thrilling reports of the murder of defenseless people came from that far-off, barbarous, part of the world. To invade it was certainly to court danger.

So, as a safe-guard, Frank had ammunition and several stands of rifles placed aboard. These were to be used strictly in defense.

And so it happened that, by the appointed day the air-ship was all ready for her trip.

True to his promise the detective was on hand at an early hour. He took his effects aboard the Sky Pilot and all was in readiness.

It was a bright, clear morning when the air-ship took its leave of Readestown and started for the steppes of Asia.

Cheering thousands saw the departure of the ship and it was an hour of triumph and pleasure for Frank Reade, Jr. the young inventor.

Frank had mapped out his course with great care.

This was a direct line for the North Atlantic, eventually sighting the coast of Norway. Thence he would strike in a direct line south over St. Petersburg and the great country of Russia to the east shores of the Caspian Sea.

Beyond the Ural River were the steppes and these Frank was aiming for. A quick voyage was the desired thing.

So after leaving Readestown the air-ship struck out for the northeast, bearing away over the upper end of Long Island and thence out to sea.

Beals, the detective, was impressed deeply with the novel sensation of sailing in the air.

He stood at the rail and looked down upon the mighty panorama below him. It was a marvelous sight.

Cities, towns, hamlets, forests, hills and valleys, green fields and great marshes, sound and shore all flitted below. People looked like tiny insects afar away and the earth was a huge disc rolling away beneath the air-ship's keel.

"By jingo!" muttered Beals, "this is an experience few can boast of! Sailing through the sky! Only think of it! What will come to pass next? Surely no greater triumph can be conceived than this!"

"No," replied Frank, candidly, "aerial navigation has been the greatest stumbling block of the inventor and the scientist. That is true."

It was dark when the air ship hung over the Sound, and the shores of Long Island were not far away, but Frank stepped up to the search-light and turned the valve.

Instantly a great blaze of light shot down through the inky blackness. It was a pathway of radiance, and everything in its line was made as plain as in daylight.

Down into a little cove in the shore flashed the light. There, rocking at their anchors, were two beautiful yachts.

A wharf was near, and upon the cliffs beyond there were handsome residences. Just beyond a summer hotel was seen.

"What would New York do without Long Island?" cried Beals; "there are so many charming resorts and summer abiding places. It is a breathing place for the jaded workers of the metropolis to lie to."

"That is true," agreed Frank, "and it is fortunate that it is so accessible for the Manhattan Islanders."

Over the beautiful summer resort the air ship sailed. The search-light made a streaming pathway across the country.

Until a late hour Beals amused himself by flashing the electric light across the country.

People below looked up and wondered at the great floating palace which passed over their heads. Some guessed it to be the air-ship. Perhaps some of the ignorant ones adjudged it a supernatural visitation.

But a little after midnight the great Atlantic lay beneath them, and the shores of America began to fade from sight.

Frank now changed the course of the air-ship a trifle more to the north. She also increased her speed.

As there was no danger of a collision the engines could be set and the wheel lashed with safety. So that one's presence was not always required in the pilot-house.

As the night was fresh and charming none of the voyagers thought of retiring early.

Frank and Beals sat out on deck enjoying the salt breeze and discussing the outlook for the future.

After a while Barney and Pomp appeared. One had a genuine Irish fiddle and the other a banjo.

Barney played all manner of Irish airs, and Pomp sang plantation songs. So the first night on board the air-ship passed pleasantly enough.

When, later on all grew sleepy, Barney kept watch while the others retired, being relieved later on by Pomp.

The next day, however, brought a change. The sky became overcast with clouds and a storm threatened.

The air-ship rocked violently in the northeast gale, and the air became so chill that all were glad to seek refuge in the cabin and keep the doors closed.

The Sky Pilot gave evidence of being a staunch craft in a high wind. She made a good steady headway against the wind.

Two or three thousand feet below the ocean was turbulent and tempestuous. The waves ran high and ships scudded under nearly bare poles.

It was a different scene from that of the previous day, but Detective Beals enjoyed it all the same. He was constantly at the pilot-house window watching the play of the elements.

For two days the air-ship battled the gale.

Then the clouds broke and once more the sun smiled upon the sea. Frank declared that, in spite of the head winds, they were three hundred miles from land.

This was good progress, but before night the distance was doubled, for the Sky Pilot was a fast sailer. Day after day it kept on.

The sea, monotonous and pitching, lay beneath them. But all things must have an end.

So one morning Beals came out on deck to behold a wonderful spectacle.

Just below was a wild and rocky coast. There were deep fiords and immense forests of fir.

It was Norway, the land of the Northmen, wild and gloomy. The Lofoten Islands lay just to the north.

The air-ship glided on and soon was traveling over the land of the Norwegians. Many strange and unusual things were seen.

But it did not take long to cross the narrow strip of Norwegian territory, and Frank finally announced that they had crossed the boundary into Sweden.

Across the Gulf of Bothnia, and at last they were over the Russian Empire.

The scenes witnessed from the deck of the air-ship were quaint and curious enough. The strange forms of life, the curious people and their habitations were all a matter of interest to the voyagers.

"Be jabers, it's all roight," averred Barney. "But all the same I'd never care to be a Rooshian. Shure, there's only wan dacint country in the world, barrin' the ould sod, an' that's Ameriky!"

"Yo' jist wants to include de State ob Georgy in dat," declared Pomp; "dat's whar I cum from!"

"Phwat do I know about that, yez black misfit," sneered Barney. "Shure, I'm talkin' av those places phwere white folks livin'!"

This angered Pomp, and his eyes rolled and his white teeth chattered like castanets.

### CHAPTER III.

#### IN ASIA.

"Wha' am dat yo' say, Iish? Does yo' mean to insult me, sah? I reckon de brack people amn't so bad as dey look, sah!"

"Begorra, I should hope not," retorted Barney. "Shure there'd be no livin' wid 'em fer noightmares!"

"Huh! Dey are a heap sight s'perior to de low down Iish, sah! I tol' yo' dat fo' a fac', sah."

"Phwat's that?" roared Barney. "Insultin' the Oirish, are yez? Shure it's not fer the loikes av yez. Take it back, ye poltroon or I'll break the face av yez!"

"I neber take anyfing back I say," retorted the coon.

"Yez don't eh?"

"No, sah!"

"Thin be me sowl it's high toime yez broke that rule. Here's at yez."

With which Barney made a biff at Pomp. The coon dodged and began to sputter.

Then Barney hit him a solid crack on the cranium. It would be folly to assume that it hurt the coon, but it made him mad just the same.

"Huh! Yo' hit me, does yo'?" he cried. "Look out dar, chile! I'se comin'!"

Down went his wooly head, and he made an avalanche-like rush at Barney.

The Celt dodged, but did not avoid it.

Pomp's head took the Celt full and fair in the stomach. Barney went down like a thousand of bricks.

"Ouch! Murther! It's kilt I am!" he sputtered, and Pomp forbore another attack. But Barney was not so badly injured as he affected.

Like a flash he was upon his feet and gripped the darky around the middle. Pomp came down with a crash.

Then followed the liveliest kind of a wrestle.

They tugged and panted, strained and struggled, until both were so thoroughly done out that they could do nothing but lie on their backs and gasp.

"Is yo' sassified, Ish?" finally asked Pomp.

"Air yez too?" retorted the Celt.

"I is, sah!"

"All roight. Thin we'll call it a draw," growled the Celt, and each limped off to his respective post of duty.

Warmer friends never existed, but they were inveterate jokers and constantly delighted in nagging each other.

Frank now set a direct line for St. Petersburg. Increased speed became the order.

But why need we weary the reader with a minute description of that journey across the great Russian Empire.

It was devoid of special incident, for the air-ship was seldom within nearer distance than half a mile of the earth.

The great Russian cities and quaint towns were passed over in due course, and one day Frank came on deck and said:

"Yonder river is the Ural."

Instantly all was excitement for the voyagers knew that beyond that silver ribbon in the landscape was Asia. This river was the dividing line, and Europe would lay behind them.

To the southward now burst into view a great expanse of water. That this was the Caspian Sea, there was no doubt.

"Asia!" exclaimed Beals. "At last we behold the land of the Orient!"

"And soon," rejoined Frank, "we shall be upon the Great Steppes and in quest of the objects of our search."

"That will be a welcome moment," declared Beals.

The air-ship drew nearer the banks of the Ural. There was no reason cogent for visiting the Caspian, so that great inland sea was left to the south.

The country was wild and unsettled. The voyagers gave it little heed but looked beyond into Tartary.

A half hour later the air-ship had crossed the Ural and was at last really in Asia.

The land of the Khirgeez and the Kurd was before them.

It was a region of limitless plain, infested with wolves and dark hills where the robber Tartars usually had their strongholds.

Here was to be the theater of their adventures. Here they were to encounter experiences of the most thrilling and fantastic kind.

All felt a premonition of this as they set their gaze upon the region. Thus far no sign of human life had been seen.

But two hundred miles farther into the interior the scene changed.

There were no cities or towns, for the Kirgheez are nomadic, and live in tents. They feast upon the flesh of their herds and such of their neighbors' herds as they can capture, roaming from place to place.

To locate the Hills of Allah and the retreat of the outlaws, of whom Beni Berber was one, now became the order.

It was pure guesswork, however, for the voyagers had no clew. Somewhere in Kurdestan or Tartary the hills were reported to be located.

There Beals expected to learn beyond all doubt the exact fate of the two boy bicyclists.

What this was they could only hazard a guess. They might be dead, or perhaps held as prisoners.

If the latter, then it would be a happy thing indeed to effect their rescue. This was, however, almost incredible, when the length of time they had been missing was considered, as well as the character of the wretches who were their captors.

"It is almost too much to hope to find them alive," declared the detective, "and yet there is a chance. However, to clear up the mystery of their fate will be something."

"If they are alive," said Frank, "they are probably slaves of these Kirgheez. I have heard of their enslaving their prisoners, and that for task-masters they are not excelled by even the Moors."

"Do you fancy it the truth?" cried Beals, eagerly. "Then perhaps we can make the hearts of all their friends in America glad, by bringing them back alive."

At this moment Barney who was in the pilot-house, motioned to Frank. The young inventor joined him.

"Shure, sor," said the Celt, "there's a queer looking cloud away out yonder ferninst the horryzon. Phwat do yez make of it, sor?"

Frank saw a peculiar funnel shaped cloud far off in the distance and contiguous to the earth. It was growing in size with great rapidity. One glance was enough.

Frank saw its character at once. He had seen the same thing in other parts of the world. He knew what it was at once.

"Jupiter," he gasped, "that is trouble for us!"

"What is it?" asked Beals, sharply.

"A tornado!"

"Do you mean it?"

"I do, and similar to those which we have upon our own western plains. It means disaster for us, unless we can avoid it."

Instantly all was excitement aboard the air ship. It was plain that the voyagers were in great danger.

To ascend above the storm was out of the question. Upper air currents would catch the air ship before it could get to the necessary altitude.

To flee before it would be certain destruction, for the tornado would easily overtake the air ship. To dodge right or left meant a quick tour of miles, and there was not time.

To remain upon the ground would be a safer course, but it would almost certainly mean the loss of the rotascopes.

These Frank knew very well that he could not afford to lose. He had but a very few moments in which to decide.

Not a mile distant was a very high precipice. It was upon the southern side of a small range of hills.

Frank noted the course of the storm and made up his mind. He seized the steering wheel.

The air-ship shot down toward the cliff. It was fully one hundred feet high with a sheer precipitous side. The Sky Pilot descended and rested in a little grove of trees close to the rocky wall.

Frank threw out great cables and fastened them to trees. Then the air grew dark.

There was one hope, and this was that the fearful destroyer would be split by the hill, and its brunt be avoided by the air-ship. It would strike the other side of the eminence.

Frank's plan was the shrewdest and most practical that could be devised under the circumstances.

The next moment the storm broke.

There was a distant dull roaring sound like the falling of many waters. Then with a fearful bellow the storm came.

Darkness shut down and the air-ship rocked and swayed. The air was full of flying material. But nothing struck the air-ship. It was not blown from its position.

It scarcely felt the blast. The smooth side of the hill answered for this. But for the space of seven minutes the nerves of the voyagers were upon the qui vive.

It did not seem possible that the air-ship could escape the general wave of destruction.

But it did.

The wind howled and roared away into the distance, and after a reasonable length of time died out. The great tornado was over.

The sun shone once more. But the scene presented was one which almost baffles description.

The country looked as if it had been swept with a broom. Trees were uprooted and great gullies were washed in the loose soil.

It was certainly fortunate for the aerial voyagers that they were able to secrete themselves behind the precipice. Else the air-ship must have been destroyed.

Everything was soaked with the avalanche of water which had swept down from the clouds. But now that all was over the fears of the voyagers departed.

They came out on deck and took a look at the situation. Truly it was a startling one.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Beals, "that wind was a savage one, was it not? Just look at that grove of trees. Every tree is snapped off or bent to the ground!"

"Right!" agreed Frank, "there is tremendous power in the tornado. We have good cause for mutual congratulation!"

"I should say so. If that wind had struck us—heigho! What is that?"

A sharp cry came from Barney and Pomp.

They were upon the opposite side of the air-ship and the cause of their excitement was instantly visible to Frank and the detective as they faced about.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### THE CLIFF CAVERNS.

THE face of the cliff had been covered with mosses and a great profusion of clinging vines.

The wind had twisted these literally from their hold and carried them away at a tangent. This left the wall of the cliff revealed.

And an astonishing sight it was which was thus revealed.

In place of the rough and rugged rock there was visible in the cliff wall a veritable fac-simile of a giant face.

Clear cut in the stone were the hideous outlines, the nose, eyes, mouth and chin being perfect in conformation.

But the mouth was an open cavern, and the eyes were windows. There were rude steps cut in the chin leading up to the cavernous mouth.

For a moment the aerial voyagers gaped at this startling discovery.

What did it mean? What was the origin of this giant face in the cliff? Why had it been carved there?

For that it was carved and that it was the work of human hands there was little doubt. Nomads of perhaps centuries previous were responsible for this work.

All sorts of conclusions were in order.

Perhaps this had been a temple of worship for the barbaric tribes, the huge face representing that of their idol or god. That the cliff was cut up into caverns seemed certain.

It was a strikingly perfect likeness of a barbaric face, and the voyagers regarded it spellbound.

"By jingo!" exclaimed the detective, "here's a discovery! What do you make of it, Frank?"

"It is probably an ancient idol or temple of worship," declared Frank.

"Built by the Tartars?"

"Their antecedents. Perhaps a thousand years ago. The Tartars of to-day are not idolaters you know."

"Well," said Beals, drawing a deep breath, "I am interested. What do you think is in that place, Frank?"

"I hardly know."

"Will it not be worth while to explore it?"

"Perhaps so!"

"It may not have any connection with our mission in these parts. But my curiosity is powerful!"

"I think we may safely undertake the exploration," declared Frank. "We cannot lose much time, at any rate, and for aught we know it may lead us to some valuable clew!"

"Golly!" cried Pomp, as he stood on his head, "dat am de way fo' to do it, Marse Frank. Maybe yo' find some gold in dat ar place."

"Be jabers, there's no tellin'," averred Barney.

The same thought had occurred to Beals. But he said nothing. It required but a few moments to prepare for the exploring tour. Pomp was to remain on board, and Barney and Beals were to accompany Frank.

They climbed down from the air-ship's side, and in a few moments were at the steps leading up to the mouth of the stone face.

But they did not ascend.

A discovery was made which precluded the necessity for this. Just on a level with the ground, a passage was found which led into the cliff.

Into this the explorers proceeded.

It was a trifle dark, but Frank carried an electric lantern, which made all as plain as day. The passage extended about a dozen feet inward, and then began to ascend.

"We've hit it!" cried Beals; "this will take us up into the chambers above!"

"Begorra, an' we saved risking our necks on them stheps," averred Barney; "that's wan' point!"

Up the passage they proceeded now rapidly, until suddenly Frank gave a start and came to a halt.

He bent down and flashed his lantern over the stone floor. Something glittered on its surface.

"Pick it up, Barney," he commanded; "it looks like a piece of steel."

"Bejabers, that's phwat it is," cried the Celt, as he picked the object up. He held it up to view.

It was a slender piece of steel wire, with a slight crook in it. For a moment the explorers regarded it intently.

"No ancient inhabitant ever owned that," declared Beals; "it would never have remained so bright all these years."

"It is steel," said Frank.

"Begorra, that's roight," declared Barney.

"But what is it?" asked Beals. Then he looked into Frank's face with a sudden quick gasp.

The little steel rod had never had but one use. That was apparent to them both.

"A bicycle spoke!" declared Frank tensely; "that is just what it is."

"And nothing else," averred Beals.

"It proves—"

"Much."

"They have been here. Perhaps, pursued by their foes, they sought refuge here."

A thousand startling thoughts, theories and surmises flashed through the brains of the explorers.

That the bit of steel was a spoke from a bicycle wheel was certain. It was quite positive proof that Wyman and Bent had visited this place.

A more startling revelation could hardly be imagined. It meant much. By the merest chance they had stumbled upon the trail of those they sought first thing.

"They have been here," repeated Beals, forgetting all else, "let us look further. They may be here yet!"

"I hardly think it," replied Frank, "they would have appeared to us before this."

"Ah, but I mean not alive," said the detective, significantly, "if they crawled in here pursued by their foes in a state of exhaustion, they may never have gone forth."

"That is true," agreed Frank. "We shall only learn that by a close search."

"Exactly!"

"Let us go on then!"

This move was executed. The explorers went on deeper into the cavern.

But though they searched it assiduously no trace of the bodies of the two bicyclists was found.

If they had sought refuge in the place, they had doubtless gone forth alive and resumed their journey. It would be necessary to look further.

But the cliff cavern was indeed an admirable hiding-place. How they had discovered it, it was not easy to guess.

There were six large chambers, one over each eye cut into the cliff,

one representing the mouth and three others connected by stone corridors.

There was no relic or clew to be found as to the identity or character of the builders of this strange temple in the cliff.

That the structure was of very ancient date there was no manner of doubt.

But after a time Beals proposed that they return to the air-ship and resume their journey.

"There is no doubt," he said, "but that Wyman and Bent were here, though how long ago and for how long we can hardly guess. We must look further."

"Right!" agreed Frank. But even as he spoke he caught sight of a heap of dark objects in one corner of the cavern near the mouth.

He flashed the rays of his lantern upon them.

Then he gave a great cry.

"Heigho!" he cried, "here is their camping place. Look, here are the dead embers of their fire. And—hello! What is all this?"

Frank picked up an object. In the light of the lantern it was revealed as a small knapsack, much worn and full of holes.

It was past service and had apparently been discarded for that reason. But some motive impelled Frank to look within it.

As he did so he gave a little start. There was a small notebook and pencil in the knapsack.

The young inventor eagerly drew these out, and read:

"Diary of Sam Bent since leaving Astrakhan June — 18—."

Beals at the same moment read this same thing over his shoulder. Words can hardly express the excitement of both.

Frank turned the pages hastily over. They were close written in a legible hand.

"This will throw light upon the mystery," he cried, "here is the most important clew yet."

"Right!" cried Beals, "how fortunate to find it. It must have been left behind inadvertently."

"Of course. Sam probably did not know there was anything in the knapsack when he threw it away."

Further search revealed no other important find. The three explorers hastened back to the Pilot.

Once upon the air ship's deck, Frank was enabled in the light of day to read the diary. This he rendered aloud, to the deep interest of the others.

It detailed first the adventures of the two bicyclists in their trip from Constantinople along the shores of the Black Sea, over the Caucasus mountains to Astrakhan on the northern shore of the Caspian.

All these incidents, while interesting, were not thrilling, and we will pass over them.

Beni Berber, their guide, was here described as a jolly fellow, and responsible for much pleasant entertainment. Berber was to guide them to Irkotsk in Central Asia.

Thence they were to strike south through Manchuria to the coast and take a vessel across to Japan.

But after leaving Astrakhan and crossing the Volga, the troubles of the two bicyclists began.

First they detected Berber in conference secretly with a number of rough-looking Kirgheez one dark night just outside the camp. Their suspicions were for the first time aroused.

Crossing the Ural they were now in Asia. And here their troubles began. We will begin the diary from here:

"Thursday! this is a clear, bright day and we are taking an early start. Harold's saddle went back on him when an hour out from camp, but we managed to repair it. My punctured tire I have mended with rubber tape and it serves me well.

"Berber's conduct is very distressing to us yet, and if we only dared, we would turn back even now. But to turn back would be to invite a certain ambush and the descent upon us of the robbers.

"I do not think our suspicions can be unfounded, for Berber's very manner implies guilt. He essays to be as pleasant as ever, but he knows that we mistrust him, and his manner is forced. God knows what it will end in.

"We shall defend ourselves to the last."

## CHAPTER V.

### THE STORY OF THE BICYCLISTS.

"FRIDAY! still on the move. Berber said to-day that we ought to sight the hills of Allah. Told us of a wonderful spring with sands of gold in its recesses and wanted us to visit it.

"I do not think we will, for we suspect it a trick of the rascal to decoy us into the stronghold of his robber friends. We do not trust him at all now, he has betrayed himself in so many lies.

"If worst comes we shall fight. We have our rifles and ammunition, and can kill a few of our foes. Harold is almost certain that the crisis will come to-night.

"His reason for this is that he detected Berber as he believes signaling to some of his gang beyond a distant steppe. The villain was just in our rear mounted on his Cossack pony, and Harold riding low over his handle bars, saw him make motions with his arms as if to a distant friend. Glancing in that direction Harold saw a distant flash of red cloth beyond an eminence. Then he rode up and told me of it.

"So we know that the foes are all about us. They are simply waiting to get us into a trap. Our position is not a pleasant one.

"I hardly know what we ought to do. Harold has come forward with a plan. It is a desperate game to get rid of Berber.

"We are dead sure that he will deliver us yet into the hands of the murderous Kirgheez. It is a question of giving him the slip or dying. But how to do this is the question. He dogs us about like a wolf and we can never get out of his sight.

"Saturday! last night we camped in a small valley. About midnight Berber left the camp and did not return until near morning. When we asked him where he had been he laughed insolently and said he had gone off by himself to make his prayers to Allah. We are sure that he met and conferred with the Kirgheez. If we are to make a move for our safety there is no time to lose.

"At last Harold has hit upon a plan. We talked it over this afternoon. The Hills of Allah are in sight. It is our belief that when we are quite near them, probably to-morrow night, the Kirgheez will descend upon us and capture us. We will be held for ransom or murdered. God help us!

"Harold's plan is a daring one. Among our effects we have some morphine. Harold proposes to place this in some wine which he has, and give the flask to Berber to drink. When the villain is asleep we will then cut out on our machines and leave him, taking care to change our course and obliterate our trail. In this scheme alone our salvation depends. We shall make the trial to-night.

"Sunday. Last night while we were about the camp-fire the wine bottle was passed around. We pretended to drink and Berber drained the flask. He was soon like a log, his stupor being so great that nothing ordinary could arouse him.

"It was our chance. We left the camp-fire burning and got upon our machines. Silently we glided away through the night. We rode several miles over the pebbles of a dry water course where the trail could not be seen.

"By daylight we were forty miles away and much exhausted. We came to a high cliff, beneath which we decided to camp until night, for it seemed safer to travel after dark. But just as we were making camp Harold made a great discovery.

"The face of the cliff was covered with vines. Lifting these, Harold found the mouth of a cavern. It has many chambers and passages, and seemed to have been once the abode of man. Here we feel quite secure.

"We have made a camp-fire and cooked a rabbit which I shot. We are overjoyed at having eluded Berber so cleverly. The future holds some uncertainties, but we rejoice in the present.

"Harold believes he can find the way to Irkotsk by means of his chart and compass, even without Berber's guidance. Or, at least, we can cross the steppes and find the abodes of honest people. But, meanwhile, we must be on the guard against the Kirgheez, for they will surely track us.

"Sunday night! We were to have set forth again this evening, but a fearful thing hangs over us. Harold came rushing into the cave to say that Berber and a gang of Kirgheez were in plain sight, riding toward us. How they ever tracked us was a mystery. We climbed to an upper chamber, where, through a hole in the cliff and by parting the vines, we could see the villains.

"Our hearts sank when they rode right up to the face of the cliff and dismounted to make camp. They were not twenty yards from us. What if they should discover our hiding-place?

"We were glad to see that it was only coincidence which had led them to this spot. They did not suspect our near presence.

"Savage brutes they were indeed. Berber was much in contrast with them, but it was plain that they feared him. He was of super-mould and had a powerful influence over them.

"Presently one of their number came in with an antelope. They built a fire and roasted the animal. After partaking of the meat they hobbled their ponies and turned in for a night's sleep. And all this while we were but a few yards from them.

"Of course it was useless to set out that night. So we crouched in the cavern, praying and hoping that they would not discover us. It was a long while till daylight came again.

"It might not have been a difficult matter to have crept down and assassinated the whole gang in their sleep, but we could not bring ourselves to do this. At last morning came. Then Berber held a long discussion with them.

"We felt sure that they did not suspect our presence, and were at a loss to know where to look for us. Finally they mounted and rode away to the eastward. We are hopeful that we have seen the last of them. At first Harold was in favor of taking the back trail for Astrakhan, but on second thought we have decided to go on to Irkotsk.

"The risk in going back would seem fully as great, for we would be in danger of falling in with bands of Kirgheez any day. The further east we went, however, the danger would lessen. So we decided to go on our way, and by traveling nights for a time, avoid the rascally foe. We shall start to-night (Monday), and hope to find a safe hiding place by daylight again. May God favor us!"

This was the last entry in the journal. As Frank finished reading there was an interval of silence.

"Be me sowl," exclaimed Barney, finally, "it's plucky lads they were an' it's luck I'm after wishin' them."

"Amen to that," said Beals; "and for aught we know they may be now safe and sound in Irkotsk."

"In that case," said Frank, "our quest is in vain."

"Not so," cried the detective. "We are by no means sure that they are not now lost somewhere in these boundless steppes, and fighting for their lives against wild wolves and savage Kirgheez."

"Well," said Frank, with a long breath, "we have at least found a trace of them."

"So we have."

"Therefore we have a clew to guide us. We will keep on."

"Good! There is no reason that I can see why we should stop here longer. They have doubtless gone on weeks ago."

"Certainly."

The air-ship's rotascopes revolved and the great stone face began to recede. Up went the Pilot.

Clearing the brow of the cliff the long level expanse of the Steppes was seen extending far into the distance.

As the voyagers gazed across them they instinctively pictured in fancy the two bicyclists speeding across the expanse. They could imagine their doubts and fears and the perils before them.

The Pilot had risen a few hundred feet over the brow of the cliff when a startling and unlooked for thing occurred.

Suddenly the blended report of rifles was heard.

Bullets came rattling against the air-ship's hull. It was a close call for Beals, who was at the rail.

For a bullet barely missed his head. He drew back in amazement.

"Eh—by jingo! We're fired on!" he cried. "Who is it?"

Frank sprung to the bow of the ship. Here by caution he could see the top of the hill below.

And there in a clump of timber he saw a score of barbaric horsemen. They were dressed fantastically with fur trimmed boots and funnel shaped hats. They were bearded, dark featured, fierce looking fellows.

"Kirgheez!" he exclaimed, "what a barbarous crew!"

Barney held the air-ship suspended where it was, and from the bow of the air-ship the aerial voyagers studied the motley crew.

"By jingo, I should say they were barbarians!" cried Beals. "I wouldn't want to be down'there now."

"Golly! dey am a tough-lookin' crew!" cried Pomp.

"Be jabers, they're wuss than ther Amerikan Injuns!" declared Barney.

The Kirgheez were making savage gestures, and their horses were wildly cavorting. Frank could not help a smile.

"I suppose they think they can frighten us into coming down," he said; "they will learn better than that."

"More flies are caught with molasses et ceter," cried Beals; "but if you say the word, Frank, we can pulverize them."

"Be jabers, we'll bag the whole av them aisy," cried Barney.

"No!" replied Frank, decidedly, "that would be slaughter. We have no right to kill them save in self-defense."

"That is true!" agreed Beals, "but truly, the world would be better rid of a few of them."

"We shall probably have that opportunity," said Frank.

The air-ship had drifted a trifle, and the deck was more on a line with the rifles of the savage foe. This was what they wanted.

Crack-ack! Crack!

Their rifles spoke sharply. Bullets flew all about the air-ship. But no damage was done.

"Bad cess to yez!" roared Barney, angrily, "av yez do that agin we'll be a'fther tachin' ye a lesson in good manners! Whist away wid yez."

To the surprise of all, the Kirgheez ceased firing, and a voice in the purest English camp up from below.

"Hello! that's the fust time I've heard my native tongue in ten years. For the love of Heaven who and what are ye? Americans or angels, to be a-flyin' in the sky!"

## CHAPTER VI.

### A STRANGE STORY.

FOR a moment our voyagers were so astounded that they were unable to speak.

They gazed at each other in amazement.

"Great Scott!" finally Beals exclaimed. "Did the rest of you hear that?"

"Begorra, I did!" cried Barney.

"Ard I, sah!" declared Pomp.

"It is a fact," said Frank; "one of those barbarians is a countryman of ours."

"An American?"

"So he has declared."

"And in such tough company! I've no respect for him!"

"Wait! There may be some reason for it. Let us hear what he has to say."

Frank advanced to the rail and scanned the upturned faces below. One of them he saw, in spite of its tan, was that of a civilized man.

"For the love of heaven," he declared, "who are you and how came you in this part of the world?"

The fellow was much excited.

"God be praised!" he cried. "I see one of my own people again! You ask me how I came among these barbarians?"

"Yes."

"I do not wonder at your question. It is a long story, but I will be brief. My name is Percival Annis. I am a New Yorker and went to Moscow to study a few months in a medical school. While there unfortunately I got involved with a society of Socialists. Our quarters were raided, and I was captured with the rest and transported to Siberia."

"For a year I suffered all the tortures of Inferno in the mines. Then I made my escape into Kirgheez Tartary. I fell into the hands of these nomads, and for a time was a slave, but finally married one of

their woman and became a chief in the tribe. I have been with them since. This is my story."

"Come down and let me see your faces and talk with my own people once more. What wonderful invention have you there, that you are able to travel in the air?"

"This is an air-ship, operated by means of electricity," replied Frank.

"What is your name?"

"Frank Reade, Jr."

"And you are from America?"

"Yes."

"Won't you come down?"

"Will it be safe?"

"By all means! I am chief, and these fellows are bound to obey me. When I saw your air-ship first I thought it some invention of the heathen Chinese or the accursed Turk. Fear nothing!"

Frank turned to Beals.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"Risk it! We can be on our guard!"

"Very well! Barney and Pomp, stand by the cabin door with rifles. At the least sign of treachery you will know what to do."

"A'right, sah!"

"Yez bet we will!"

Then Frank lowered the air-ship. Down it settled and rested on the ground.

The Kirgheez sat motionless on their horses twenty yards away. Their leader Percival Annis, the escaped Siberian walked boldly up to the air-ship.

"I am glad to see you, gentlemen," he said, heartily, and his manner certainly implied sincerity.

He sprang over the rail and stood on the air-ship's deck.

His figure was tall and strong, and his features would have been handsome but for the hunted expression and haggard lines.

He had all the appearance of a fugitive, of a man hunted for his life.

There were tears in his eyes as he gripped the hands of his countrymen. Then he told the story of his life again.

"Do you ever think of escape from this region?" asked Beals.

Annis shook his head.

"No," he said.

"Have you no longing for America?"

"I have buried that."

A sad light shone in his eyes.

"No matter how keen the desire," he continued, "my honor forbids it."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Frank, "in what does your honor bind you?"

"I have a Kirgheez wife. While I did not wed her for love, yet she has borne me beautiful children; she is true as steel and I would be a craven to desert my offspring."

"Spoken like a man!" cried Beals. "You have our respect and our admiration, Mr. Annis."

"That is true," replied Frank.

"Thank you," replied Annis fulsomely. "I often have yearnings for my native land. If my wife would return there with me I would go back. But this is her land and these her people. Here we must stay."

"You are right," agreed Frank. "We wish you life-long happiness, sir."

"Thank you. But now you have aroused my curiosity."

"Ah?"

"What has brought you to this out of the way part of the world?"

Beals gave a sharp cry.

"Ah, perhaps you can help us!" he cried. "We have come here upon an errand of mercy, or philanthropy—call it what you will."

"Indeed! If it is in my power I will help you."

"Two of our countrymen—young New Yorkers on bicycles—are lost somewhere in this part of the country. They were betrayed by a rascally guide—Beni Berber."

Annis gave a great start.

"Beni Berber!" he exclaimed. "He is a robber and a cut-throat! God pity them if they have fallen into his hands!"

"They were in his power, but escaped from him."

And with this, Beals proceeded to give Annis the whole story. The Kirgheez convert was keenly interested.

But he shook his head sadly.

"The Khirgeez are mostly barbarians," he said. "Beni Berber's band are robbers, and worse than the average. Yet I am one of these people now, and to take sides with you would make me a traitor."

"What?" cried Beals, in horror. "You cannot lend yourself to such a nefarious game!"

"You do not understand. Our band would do nothing of the kind. But on the other hand, we would not dare take sides against another band. I sympathize with you and would help you if I could, but I cannot do it openly. That is all."

"I can see your position," said Frank, at this juncture, "and you are right."

"Yet you will admit that it is not right to see these boys wantonly murdered!" cried Beals.

"I will admit that," declared Annis, "and I stand ready to prevent it if I can."

"Can you prevent it?"

"I do not know. Certainly not openly."

"Mr. Annis has spoken fairly," interposed Frank. "We can ask no more. Now if he can advise what to do, or give us any clew—"

"Good!" cried Beals, eagerly.

"I think I can," replied Annis. "I can tell you where Berber and his gang hang out. It is in the Allah Hills to the north of us. If the two boys are his prisoners, you will find them there. He has also another stronghold."

"Ah!"

"That is to the south near the Sea of Aral in a deep valley which is undermined with caves. Look for him there."

"Do you think we would be more likely to find him there?"

"Yes, unless he has followed the two boys to the eastward. It is possible that he has captured them, and if so he has taken them to Aral."

Annis spoke with conviction, and his words had weight with his hearers. Beals turned to Frank.

"I don't see what more we can ask of Mr. Annis," he said.

"He has rendered us valuable information," agreed Frank, "for all of which we are indeed grateful."

"I would gladly help you more," said Annis, "but I could not do it safely. It is not for myself I care, but for my flesh and blood. However, I wish you success, and nobody would be more pleased than myself to see Beni Berber brought up with a short turn."

With this he turned to the rail. He made a respectful salute which was returned by the voyagers.

Then he returned to his followers. He spoke a few short words with them. The Kirgheez mounted and rode away with the convert at their head.

The voyagers watched them out of sight.

Then Barney blurted out:

"Begorra! I av a bit ov pity for that poor chap. Shure he's put himself in a scrape an' is that honorable he can't get out av it."

"That is true, Barney," declared Beals, "But it is to his credit."

"Shure it is, sor!"

The plans of the voyagers were now somewhat changed. The previous plan had been to proceed in a straight line to Irkonsk.

The quest for the boy bicyclists had now begun to assume almost the character of the search for a needle in the proverbial haystack.

It was certainly a tough undertaking in that vast country. But Frank was not dismayed.

He conferred with Beals.

"Do you know what I believe?"

"What?"

"That the boys eventually fell into the power of Berber, and were taken to the Sea of Aral."

The detective was reflective.

"It may be so," he said, finally. "Yet we know that they started out for Irkonsk."

"We do not know that they reached that point."

"True enough. Well, so be it. I believe if we find Berber we shall find the boys. What say you?"

"That is my belief."

"Then to the Sea of Aral! Find Berber first of all."

"Exactly."

"I am satisfied."

"Then it is settled."

Frank went into the pilot house. He turned the rotoscope lever and the Pilot leaped into the air.

Up she went to a dizzy height. Then Frank set his course to the south-east. Soon the air ship was speeding along at rapid speed.

But night had begun to fall rapidly. As it was deemed best to take a close look at the country as they went along, Frank checked the air ship when the darkness became intense.

As it was naught but a level plain in all directions, and there was little chance for a foe to creep up unseen, Frank decided to spend the night on the plain.

So the air ship descended and rested upon the smooth floor of the plain.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE RUSSIANS.

As all were fatigued with the day's incidents it was deemed best to turn in at once.

Barney was left on guard for the first half of the night. He was to be relieved later by Pomp.

The search-light was to be constantly used in sweeping the plain so that the approach of a foe could be seen. Thus equipped Barney took his post.

But there were other than human foes abroad that night.

On the face of the globe there is no more fierce and deadly animal after dark than the Tartar wolf.

Roaming the steppes in vast herds they are certainly to be dreaded by the traveler as the fleetest horse could not outrun them.

But Frank believed that the glare of the search-light would be sufficient to hold them at bay, so he gave no special orders to Barney upon retiring.

The Celt had not been two hours at his post and it was not yet midnight when trouble came.

A distant long loud howl was heard.

This was the first warning.

The Celt sat by the search-light swinging the cylinder about occasionally.

"Bejabers!" he muttered, "that's wan av them wolves or I'm a fool. I'll jist say phawat effict this wull have upon him."

He turned the cylinder in the direction of the bowl. But at that moment another came from an opposite direction.

Then another came from a different quarter. They multiplied until finally there was a terrific chorus and all coming from every direction.

Then Barney saw the great shaggy bodies flashing through the grass. They seemed to have made a cordon about the air-ship.

They were far from being afraid of the electric lights. This was quickly apparent.

Soon there was a tremendous army surging about not fifty yards from the air-ship. Their din aroused the other voyagers, but none came on deck, for it was not believed that the wolves would venture an attack.

But Barney began to think different. His temper got the best of him.

"Bad cess to the howling pack av yez, he cried; "yez are enough to make a soul crazy! Take that an' see how yez loike it!"

With which he lifted his gun and fired into the pack.

One of the wolves fell, but in less than half a minute not a tuft of his hair was left. He was devoured instantly by his companions.

Again Barney fired, but this had no effect upon the fears of the creatures.

Indeed one of them sprung clear over the rail of the air ship and upon the deck. Barney put a bullet through it.

But its companions came over after it, and a score of them were instantly struggling over the carcass.

They got their eyes upon Barney, and the Celt's career would have found a sudden termination, had he not acted promptly.

He sprang into the pilot house.

"Bad cess to the devils!" he yelled as he bolted the door. "Shure they'll ate up the air-ship!"

The row on the deck and the horrid din brought all the others out of their berths. By this time the deck was packed with wolves.

They were yelling, snarling and snapping at the doors and windows and trying to tear their way in.

"Jupiter!" exclaimed Beals, "they are worse than a plague! What can we do to drive them away, Frank?"

"We'll find a way," muttered the young inventor.

He went into the pilot house and pressed the rotoscope lever. Instantly the air-ship sprang into the air.

The result was curious.

Instantly the majority of the wolves scrambled over the rail. They fell hundreds of feet and were devoured by the gang below.

But half a dozen of the shaggy monsters were left. These dared not leap, and ran like the treacherous cowards they were from one end of the ship to the other trying to get off.

But they might as well have tried to fly to the moon, for they had not the courage to take the awful leap, for the air-ship was now a thousand feet in the air.

Frank threw open the cabin door. Beals grasped him by the arm.

"What are you doing, Frank?" he cried, "don't be rash!"

"Pshaw!" laughed the young inventor. "I know what these fellows are. They are too great cowards to venture to attack us now!"

And in verification of this, Frank deliberately kicked one of the passing monsters.

It slunk away with a cowardly whine. The spirit of the awful scavengers was gone.

Six of the giants were on the deck of the air-ship. What was to be done with them?

Certainly they were undesirable fellow passengers. But Frank had a plan.

He went into the pilot house and put on some rubber insulated gloves. Then he connected a wire with the dynamos. It was heavily charged.

Emerging on deck he approached one of the wolves and struck it with the wire.

There was a flash, a sharp yelp and the smell of singed hair. The wolf lay in a stupid heap on the deck.

"Throw him over, Barney and Pomp," cried the young inventor.

Over the rail went the monster. When he struck the earth he was pulp. Two minutes later he was in the stomachs of his former companions.

It was short shrift.

Every wolf on the deck went the same way. With the exit of the last one Frank disconnected the wire.

The rest of the night the air-ship rode at anchor at a safe distance of two hundred feet from the earth. The wolves gave no further trouble.

With the coming of day not one was to be seen or found.

But with the rising of the sun the air-ship was again on its way. To the southward it bore.

But before the hour of noon it swung over a high watershed and a sizable lake was presented to view, its shores devoided of timber.

A glance satisfied Frank that it was a saline lake.

But what claimed his attention was a camp on the shore. There were a score of gaudy colored tents.

The gleam of weapons and the glitter of equipments showed that the hundred or more men there encamped were not nomads but soldiers.

"Soldiers, and in this part of the world?" cried Beals, "that is queer! But yes, I can see the Russian flag. It is a company of Russian guards!"

"You are right!" agreed Frank.

Then they exchanged glances.

"Russian guards in this lonely part of Tartary! They must have come hither upon an important and a special mission."

What was it?

To say that the aerial voyagers were curious would be a mild statement. Moreover, Frank and Beals were determined to know.

As the air-ship drew nearer, the alarm call of the bugle was heard. In an instant the men armed sprang from tents,

They formed square. The appearance of the air-ship must have been a startling thing to them.

Our voyagers could even hear the orders of the officers, and though spoken in Russian they were not unintelligible to one member of the party.

This was Frank Reade, Jr.

The young inventor had spent a season in Moscow, and had acquired a smattering of the Russian tongue. He listened attentively.

The Russian soldiers regarded the air-ship plainly with surprise and not a little apprehension. They held their guns ready for use.

The air-ship settled down until right over the camp. Then it was held in suspension.

A hail came up from below.

"Heigho! Who are you?" was the call in the Russian tongue.

"Parlez vous Francais?" asked Frank.

"I don't understand," replied the officer, in Russian.

"We are Americans," replied Frank, in broken Russian. "Who are you?"

"Americans?" cried the officer in surprise. "Ah, that is like your people to be sailing in the air. What do you so far from home?"

"We are in quest of a couple of our countrymen, whom we fear have fallen into the hands of the Kirgheez."

"So?" replied the Russian, with interest. "Then maybe we can help you."

"Thank you!"

"Will you not descend and talk with us?"

Frank turned to Barney and said:

"Lower the air ship."

The Celt obeyed.

It descended and rested upon the ground not fifty yards from the camp of the Russians. The officer, who wore the uniform of a lieutenant, advanced quickly.

Frank sprang over the rail, as did Beals, and met him.

They gripped hands, and Frank introduced himself and Beals. Then the Russian officer said:

"I am Sergius Ivan Petrosky, lieutenant of the Emperor's Guards. I am in Asia upon a very important mission."

"Indeed!" said Frank.

"I am in quest of a notorious anarchist and nihilist, who, by the way, is also an American, though one time a student at Moscow!"

Frank gave a start.

"His name?" he asked.

"His name is Percival Annis."

Frank gave a sharp cry and exchanged glances with Beals. The lieutenant was quick to note this.

His face changed.

"Ah!" he said, in a tense voice, "you know this man?"

"No—well—that is to say—yes!" stammered Frank. "We have met him!"

"In this region?" asked Petrosky, eagerly.

Frank hesitated, then Beals gave him a quick, resolute look, and the young inventor replied:

"I prefer not to say!"

The lieutenant's face changed again. A quick, hard light flashed from his eyes.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### ARBITRARY ACTION.

PETROSKY turned and made a quick motion to his men!

So quickly was it heeded that the two Americans hardly saw his purpose until it was executed. A dozen soldiers filed to the rear of the Americans.

Frank gave one swift glance behind him and his lip curled.

"Pardon me!" said Petrosky, politely. "I hope to give you no trouble. But I must beg of you to answer my question. Have you seen Percival Annis in this vicinity?"

"Why do you wish to know?" asked Beals, shrewdly.

"I will tell you. He is a dangerous foe of the Czar's and was concerned in an attempt on his life. His blood must answer for it!"

"But you cannot hold us responsible for his deeds," said Frank.

The lieutenant bowed.

"I am glad to know that you are not responsible," he said, "but you seek to shield him!"

"How so?"

"You will not give me the information I desire."

"Even if I were able, why should I betray him?"

"Your refusal to do so brands you as in his sympathy, and makes of you also an enemy of the Czar!"

"Nonsense," cried Beals, contemptuously; "it does nothing of the kind! Annis has cut loose from your part of the world and ours. He will never trouble your Czar again. Why seek his life?"

"The Czar demands revenge!"

"Indeed," said Frank, sharply; "then he must demand aid of others than ourselves. We utterly refuse to give him any assistance."

The lieutenant's eyes flashed.

"Take care," he said. "Incautious words may turn the evidence against you! How shall we know that you do not meditate harm to his majesty with your infernal air ship?"

"Well, you are a precious lot of fools," cried Beals, angrily. "We are not in Moscow nor in Russia! We care nothing about you nor your Czar! If a despicable spirit of revenge leads you to track down this unfortunate man Annis and murder him, you need not expect us to help you. We are not in any way bound to do so!"

"I ask you for information."

"We have none to give."

"You refuse?"

"We do."

There was a ring of defiance in Beals' voice. Frank nodded in acquiescence. The lieutenant's face was black.

"Then you are implicated with him in shielding him," he cried; "it is an offense punishable by death to shield an anarchist. You are prisoners of the Czar!"

"What!" exclaimed Frank, astounded by these words; "do you mean that?"

"I do, sir."

Frank turned to retreat to the air-ship. But a file of soldiers were closing in about him.

He saw at once the folly of the move. To say that he was angry would be a mild statement.

He turned hotly to the Russian.

"Sir!" he cried, "you interfere with us at your peril!"

"In what respect, sir?" asked the lieutenant, mockingly.

"We are American citizens and beyond the border of your country. You have no jurisdiction."

"We have superior force," declared the Russian, sneeringly.

"Moreover, we are under orders from the Czar."

Frank and Beals looked at each other.

They saw at once how useless it was to attempt argument. They were thus given an instance of Russian ideas of justice.

"It cannot be possible that you are in earnest!" cried Frank. "You have no right to trouble us. We are implicated in no plot against your Czar nor any of your people."

"You are prisoners, sirs," replied Petrosky suavely. "Resistance will mean death."

He made a motion to the soldiers. They closed in.

Beals lost his temper.

As one of the men placed a hand on him he let out with his good right arm and knocked him down.

"Hands off!" he cried, with flashing eyes. "No dog of a Russian shall play a snide game on me!"

"Seize him! Bind him!" yelled Petrosky, harshly.

"Easy, Beals," said Frank, "it is of no use to resist. We must trust in Barney and Pomp to pull us out of this scrape."

The detective was furious, but he saw that Frank was right. Rash action would not pay.

The soldiers closed about the two men and they were roughly handled, as they were bound and made prisoners.

"I warn you, lieutenant," said Frank, quietly, "that you will pay for this outrage."

Petrosky showed his teeth in a leering smile, but said no more. He turned to his men.

Meanwhile Barney and Pomp from the air-ship's deck had witnessed the whole affair.

To say that they were indignant would be a mild statement.

"Be me sowl!" cried the Celt, "it's an outrage, an' we must make them give thin' up, nagur."

"Golly! I'se wif yo', chile. Wha' shall we do?"

"Bejabers, we'll open foire on them wid our rifles."

And this they would certainly have done and have precipitated a tragedy had it not been for Frank.

The young inventor shouted to them.

"Send the air-ship up, Barney," he cried in English; "don't let them come aboard of you."

"Shure, an' leave yez behind, sor!" objected the Celt.

"Never mind us! Look out for the air-ship first. You can devise a plan to rescue us later."

The Russian soldiers were rushing down to seize the air-ship. But before they could reach the rail it sprang into the air.

They were baffled.

The affair made Petrosky very angry. The Russian officer had counted much upon securing the air-ship and confiscating it in the name of the Czar.

Frank knew well what his purpose was and that the wind-up would be consignment to Siberia for himself and his companions.

The slightest bit of evidence, even suspicion, is seized as a pretext by the Czar's minions often to send innocent persons to that fearful exile.

Frank knew well that this would be the result if he should be taken into Russia as a prisoner. It was a desperate situation.

But despite the outlook, Frank was cool and unconcerned. It was Beals who was distressed.

"Confound these thick skulled knaves of Russians!" he cried; "they haven't sense enough for pigs! They will be the ruin of us!"

"Unless we can outwit them," said Frank.

"Can you suggest a plan?"

"I am waiting for one to suggest itself."

"Is there any possibility of that?"

"I think so."

"I pray Heaven there may be! Of course Barney and Pomp will come to our relief?"

"I am placing much dependence on them."

At this moment Petrosky came up stiffly, and said curtly:

"Will you be so kind as to command your men to bring down the air-ship? It is the property of the Czar, for I seize it in his name."

Frank smiled sardonically.

"Oh, you do, eh?" he said, coolly. "Well, before you can seize a bird you must first bring it down out of the air."

"I depend upon you to do that, sir," commanded Petrosky.

"You will be very aged and gray-haired when I do that," retorted Frank; "do you think I am a fool?"

"Then you will not order it down?"

"No, sir!"

Petrosky glared at the obdurate prisoner. He placed a hand on the hilt of his sword, and said:

"You will do as I tell you, or you will die!"

Frank looked the other square in the eye and for a moment lost his temper.

"You contemptible ass!" he said strongly, in Russian; "do you think you can frighten me? I am not a cur and a coward like you! I have no fear of death!"

A hiss escaped Petrosky's lips.

"We shall see," he gritted. Then he gave orders to his men to fire upon the air-ship.

The bullets rattled against the air-ship's hull like hail. They did more, they excited the rage of Barney and Pomp.

"Be me sowl. I can't shtand it, naygur!" cried the Celt, "give it to 'em back agin!"

"Golly! I'se wif yo', chile!"

Instantly they opened fire with their Winchesters. Two of the Russians dropped. In a moment two more dropped.

This astounded the obdurate Petrosky. He could hardly believe his senses.

How dared they open fire upon the soldiers at the mighty Czar. Such a thing was treason and death.

But he forgot one thing.

He was dealing with American citizens, free and enlightened and independent people, and not the groveling representatives of down-trodden serfdom.

He speedily learned that he was contending with a different class of people. He was too pig-headed and brutish to see that he had made a mistake.

Frank was at once seized with alarm when he saw this somewhat rash action of Barney and Pomp.

He feared the outcome would be disastrous. The brutal Russians in revenge might turn and murder their captives.

He communicated this thought to the detective who agreed with him. They were assured that their position was one of greatly enhanced danger.

But Barney shouted down from the deck:

"Don't yez be afraid, Misther Frank! We'll kape our guns ready to shoot de fust man what attempts to do yez harm. They'll niver live to reach ye!"

The battle had now opened in earnest. Its effect upon the Russians was deadly.

But the two defenders of the air-ship were invulnerable. They could fire as they chose from the air-ship's deck without danger of being hit by the return volleys of the soldiers.

#### CHAPTER IX.

##### BERBER APPEARS ON THE SCENE.

THE Russians were dropping like sheep, and not the least bit of harm had as yet been done to the air-ship or its defenders.

At this rate the soldiers bade fair to be exterminated. Certainly they had the worst of the encounter.

They were not able to bring down their antagonist to anything like level ground.

The terms of the conflict were decidedly one-sided, and so the lieutenant speedily saw. He was furious.

As Frank had predicted, the spirit of revenge seized upon him. He was determined to vent his spite upon his helpless prisoners.

So he turned and made a bee line for them.

He carried his unsheathed sword, and murder was in his eye. It was plain that he meant to use the weapon.

"Curses on you!" he yelled. "We have lost twenty good men and all at the hands of your dogs of slaves up there and by your orders! You shall pay for it!"

"Call off your own dogs!" said Frank, coolly, "and we'll call off ours and be quits!"

"Bring down your air-ship!"

"Never!"

"Then you shall die!"

"Stop and think. If you kill us not one of you will escape alive. My men are instructed to kill every one of you. Kill us and then die yourselves. Our lives for yours."

Frank spoke strongly, determinedly. The Russian officer for a moment lost his blindness.

"Call down your air-ship," he said; "I will try and get clemency for you at the hands of the Czar!"

"Pooh!" retorted Frank; "we scorn such an offer. Call off your men or you will all die!"

"You shall die first!"

"Take care! You attack us at your peril!" said Frank. But the Russian lieutenant only laughed scornfully.

"Pshaw!" he cried. "What do I care for your threats. Two of the Czar's foes shall die, at any rate."

He flashed his sword aloft to make a pass at Beals. It was likely that moment might have been the detective's last, but for an intervention.

Quick eyes on the air ship's deck had seen the misguided officer's action, and divined his intention.

This was enough.

It sealed his fate.

Barney fired quick as a flash. His aim was deadly. The bullet struck the Russian full in the head.

He dropped in a lifeless heap; his career was ended.

Other Russians came running to his aid, but they were almost instantly dropped.

The ground was now covered with dead and dying Russian soldiers. The slaughter was great.

Barney and Pomp had four rifles at hand.

While Pomp was loading two, Barney was firing the other two, and always with deadly effect.

Such terrific fire could not fail to have its effect upon the Russians. It tried their nerves sorely.

The result was that with the fall of their leader they became demoralized. They dispersed singly and it became harder to pick them off.

But none of them ventured to approach Frank and Beals. The deadly fire from the air-ship precluded this.

The result was that presently Barney saw his chance and sprang into the pilot-house.

He lowered the air-ship and threw over the rail a long rope ladder. To the lower strand he attached a knife.

This swung down in front of Frank Reade, Jr. He quickly managed to get hold of the knife and with a great effort managed to cut his bonds.

The Russians seeing this rallied, but a hot fire drove them back. The field belonged to the air-ship.

Frank quickly cut Beals' bonds as well; with a cheer he sprang upon the rope ladder.

Bullets whistled about them as they mounted to the rail but fortunately they were not hit.

Once on the air ship's deck they were happy indeed. Grandly they had outwitted the cunning Russians.

The air ship shot up to greater heights, and beyond the range of the Russians. Then the aerial voyagers fairly embraced each other in their joy.

"Golly, I was done 'fraid yo' was done fo', Marse Frank!" cried Pomp. "I'se drefful glad yo's cu'n back all safe."

"Begorra, I cud see no other way but to fight for it," declared Barney.

"Your coup-de-main worked well!" cried Frank, enthusiastically; "it saved our lives!"

"I don't want anything more to do with Russians," declared Beals.

"I declare they are the worst people to deal with in the world! They don't value human life!"

"Well, the ignorance and bigotry of that Russian lieutenant was without parallel," declared Frank; "but we are well rid of them!"

"Indeed we are!"

"It is lucky for poor Annis that they have never recaptured him."

"They got no clew from us."

"Not much, and now that Petrosky is dead, probably these fellows will be glad to abandon the quest."

"I hope they will."

Glancing over the rail, the Russians were seen collecting their dead and wounded. They were much scattered and apparently wholly demoralized.

Frank had no desire to have further intercourse with them. So he headed the air-ship across the salt lake.

Upon the other shore it was decided to descend and camp for dinner. So the air-ship alighted in a bank of white sand.

Pomp soon had a lively fire under a bank and was engaged in getting the noonday meal.

Barney wandered away along the lake shore.

He had not gone far when he noticed a curious mark in the wet sands. It looked like the track of an endless serpent, and extended as far as he could see.

"Be the sowl of ould Maguire," cried Baruey, "that's not the track of an animal, I'll swear. Shure—as I live it is the track av a bicycle."

This discovery had a startling effect upon the Celt.

Of course he knew what it meant. Either Wyman or Bent had passed that way shortly before.

Here was a fresh clew.

So excited was the Celt that he ran back to the air-ship, shouting:

"Shure, I've found it, Misther Frank. It's a bicycle thrack in the sand!"

At sound of this startling declaration Frank sprang down from the air-ship's deck. He joined the Celt.

A glance was enough.

"A bicycle track," he muttered. "It is either Wyman or Bent. Which way were they going?"

He inspected the wheel mark carefully, and was convinced that the course was eastward and toward Irkotsk.

"They did not change their course," he muttered. "It is evident that they found the coast clear when they passed this way."

Another wheel mark was found further up the beach. This was proof positive.

The boy bicyclists had passed that way. Moreover, they probably had just missed contact with the Russian soldiers.

For this they might be thankful enough, for there was no telling what new quibble the lieutenant Petrosky might have taken.

It was plain that they had passed that way not long before.

This was startling as well as wonderful news, for it was proof that the boys were yet alive and had their freedom.

Their position could at once be seen. Doubtless they had been pursued by the Kirgheez, and had been kept busy for months dodging them, or out-riding them.

The effect of all this upon the voyagers was most joyful.

Beals was elated.

He had faith now that they would come very quickly upon the lost boys, and their rescue would be quickly accomplished. But Frank said:

"It may be harder now than ever to find them. They are on the move rapidly, and may elude us a thousand times. They are probably changing their course every hour."

"A sort of dodging game, eh?"

"Just so! It is easier for them to dodge than for us to choose their previous course."

"Why don't they strike out straight for Irkotsk?" asked Beals.

"That is easy enough to see," declared Frank; "they are constantly meeting the Kirgheez. It is their safest and best way to dodge them."

"Just so," agreed Beals, "but where do you think they are now?"

"We can only guess; we will follow the trail as far as we can."

In view of the fact that an important trail had been struck, camp was quickly struck and the air-ship started to overtake the bicyclists.

Just beyond the lake was a high plateau. Up to this the track led and disappeared.

Beyond the plateau there was a high range of hills. The trail had led directly toward them.

"There is where we shall find them," declared Frank; "let us go there at once."

So the air-ship was held down for the hills. It did not take long to cover the intervening distance.

But suddenly, as the air-ship sailed over a little pocket in the hills, an astounding sight was revealed.

There, with their Tartar ponies tethered, was a group of men. They were Kirgheez, and savage looking fellows.

They were dressed in the wild fashion of the Kirgheez. But among them was one who would command attention anywhere.

He was well dressed and wore a garb half European. A glance satisfied Frank at once.

It was Beni Berber, the Tartar robber. They were in quest of the two boy bicyclists.

There was no doubt of this.

The appearance of the air-ship created a sensation. Some of the Kirgheez sped to their horses and rode away.

But Beni Berber stared at it with startled gaze. Fire was opened upon it; but the bullets flew by.

Frank was determined to speak with the outlaw, and held the air-ship down to within hailing distance. Then he hailed the Kirgheez.

Frank used Russian, French and German. But the villain understood none of these.

However, he had a smattering of English, and using this made reply.

## CHAPTER X.

### IN CLOSE PURSUIT.

BERBER spoke English roughly. Every word he uttered was hardly plain. Frank answered him.

"Where are the boys whom you undertook to guide to Irkotsk?" asked Frank; "we have come in search of them!"

"They be maybe in Irkotsk," replied Berber, in substance. "How expect me know, eh?"

"You know better than that, you villain. You know very well that you decoyed them into the Kirgheez' plains to rob and imprison them for ransom."

"That is a lie, sir!" replied Berber; "believe me, Effendi, boys reached Irkotsk all right."

We will not attempt to give Berber's conversation in his broken English. Frank could hardly understand it.

"You know that is false, Beni Berber!" replied Frank. "You are even now on their trail."

The Kirgheez chief gave a start.

"How you know zat?" he asked.

"We have tracked them and you also. We know of your treacherous game!"

Berber showed anger.

"You are poor fools!" he declared, "go way an' leave us. Fly away in your boat with wings."

"Not until you desist in their pursuit," declared Frank. "Now I warn you to abandon it."

But Berber laughed scornfully.

"You can do me no harm," he declared. "We are fifty and you have but four, we can see. If you come down we show you how to fight."

"Ah, but I have weapons such as you have not got," warned Frank, "again I tell you, Beni Berber, to turn back."

But the Kirgheez only laughed jeeringly.

"You are nothing," he said, snapping his fingers, "this is the land of Berber and his people. You have no law here!"

"As good as any law," replied Frank, coolly. "do you see that pass? The first man to enter it without my permission dies!"

For a moment Berber hardly knew what to reply, but already fear began to appear in his face.

He folded his arms, and finally made a sullen reply:

"You no catch us yet doing harm to Yankee boys. When you do, then you can talk."

"Ah, but you decoyed them into this country to rob and murder them!"

"That is not so," protested Berber, stoutly. "They try kill me, My men they tell you—boys give me liquor with drug to poison me, then leave me on plain for wolves to eat. They go away an' take my money—all I have. That why I chase them!"

"That is a black lie," cried Beals, hotly. "You know that they would do nothing of the kind! You are a villain, Beni Berber!"

The wretch shrugged his shoulders.

"No more say," he said; "no more talk with you!"

Beals turned to Frank.

"I don't know but that he is right," he said. "What is the use of more talk with him? What can we do with him?"

"Nothing as I see," replied Frank. "We can only go on and find the boys."

"And leave Berber to find other victims!"

"It is not incumbent on us to hang him for his sins."

"No, nor do we want to. Very well; let the wretch go. Shall we go ahead?"

"Yes."

Frank gave the word to Barney, and the air ship sailed on. It was soon over the deep pass.

As this was the only route the bicyclists could have taken, it was easy to follow them.

On sailed the air ship, and in due course the pass terminated in a deep valley in the heart of the hills.

But around this there extended a sort of broad shelf of stone next to the mountain wall. It was like a vast promenade above the valley, and looked as if designed by human hands.

Coming from the pass, one might choose either course to descend into the valley or keep on along this promenade.

Which had the bicyclists chosen?

This was a question, and one which it seemed not easy to find an answer to.

"I should think they would descend into the valley," said Beals.

"Very well," agreed Frank, "we will take that course."

So down through the valley sailed the air-ship. The depression was fully fifty miles long between mighty walls of rough mountains.

In the center of the valley was a huge lake with mirror-like surface. There was little show of vegetation.

What lay beyond these mountain ranges could only be guessed. It was enough to know that this was the course taken by the cyclists.

As they progressed, however, Frank kept a close watch of the mountain wall. He more than half suspected that the cyclists had taken this course and not the valley.

And as the Pilot was gliding along over the valley lake, a sight attracted the attention of all.

From a small pocket in the side of the mountain just off the promenade, so called, there arose a faint column of smoke.

It curled aloft in thin wreaths, and might have been overlooked by a casual eye.

At once he cried:

"Change the course, Barney! Do you see that smoke, Beals?"

"Ah," cried the detective, excitedly, "that is their camp-fire!"

"Let us hope so!"

The air-ship swerved about and bore down for the smoke. As it drew nearer it was plainly a camp fire.

Soon the Pilot was over the flat projecting shelf, and, descending, rested upon it. Then Frank and Beals leaped over the rail.

They approached the narrow entrance to the pocket. So sure were both that they would find the bicyclists there that they never thought of possible danger.

Turning the angle they entered the crevice.

In that moment they were bitterly disappointed. It was empty.

The boys were not there.

"By Jupiter!" exclaimed Beals, "we are just too late!"

"Too late!" ejaculated Frank. "That is true. But they have been here."

"Yes, and not long since."

"We are close upon their heels."

"Let us then waste no time here but press on to overtake them."

But Frank stepped forward and kicked aside the embers of the fire. He knew that it would afford a clew to Berber as it had to them.

There were plenty of tracks and other evidence of the presence of the bicyclists in the place but a short while before.

Frank and Beals turned to return to the air-ship. They had no doubt now of overtaking the boys in a very short time.

They had just clambered over the rail when a sound reached the hearing of both which gave them a start.

They listened intently.

"What is it?" asked Beals.

"The hoof beat of horses!"

"And somebody yelling fiercely!"

"Yes."

"Heigho! there goes a rifle shot! Something is up!"

Startled beyond measure, Frank was about to enter the pilot house and raise the ship to ascertain the cause of the trouble when a startling thing occurred.

Suddenly around a bend in the promenade there flashed two figures. They were torn and tattered in garments and pale of feature. Each was mounted upon a dilapidated wheel and they were flying at a terrific rate of speed.

So swift did they come into view that they did not give more than a swift glance at the air-ship.

Then they were by and turning to the right seemingly into the very wall of the mountain disappeared very mysteriously from view.

All was over in the twinkling of an eye.

Beals let out a yell.

"It's them! Stop them!" he screamed. "We've found them at last! Confound it, where have they gone? Don't they know we are friends?"

"I doubt if they had time to size us up," replied Frank, "they would hardly look for friends in this wild part of the world!"

Beals saw that this very logically explained the situation. It was natural that the boys fleeing for their lives should fail to see anybody on the air-ship's deck, much less to recognize them or the character of the air-ship.

But where had they vanished to so suddenly?

Before an answer could be found to this question their pursuers came suddenly into view.

They were horsemen, and drew rein in sudden amazement at sight of the air-ship. It was a case of mutual surprise.

For at the head of the Kirgheez pursuers rode Beni Berber.

The wily nomad had cut around the mountain so as to intercept the boys when they should emerge by another pass, which they had intended to do. It was a clever trick, and they had only escaped by the merest chance.

But at sight of the air-ship, which was a most unexpected thing for the villain, he drew rein.

For a moment he glared at Frank and Beals, who were at the rail.

Then he gritted:

"Allah defend! What do you here?"

"You may well ask that question," replied Frank, keenly. "I will answer it by asking you the same."

"We are passing through by another pass," replied the Kirgheez; "you forbade us the other," with a sneer.

"And accidentally run across the two bicyclists," replied Frank, with sarcasm. "You gave them a fright."

"That is their folly," replied Berber, suavely. "We wanted to catch them to tell them of your presence in this country."

"Very likely," said Frank. "You are a very clever fellow, Berber. It is a pity you did not overtake them."

"We tried to," replied the villain.

Then a startling thing happened.

He had dismounted from his horse, as had others of his crew. They were not a dozen yards distant from the air ship's rail.

Berber, swift as lightning, spoke one word to his men. With incredible quickness—in fact, a very second of time—they leaped for the air ship's rail. Over it they went, and overtook Frank and Beals at the cabin door.

## CHAPTER XI.

### A TURNING OF TABLES.

WORDS hardly suffice to describe the situation.

A blow upon the head laid Beals senseless on the deck. Frank was instantly in the grip of a half dozen of the villains.

But quick as had been the onslaught, he had shot down two of the wretches at close range.

Into the cabin rushed the black crew. Barney and Pomp had grasped their rifles and made a stand by the pilot house door.

Four of the Khirgeez fell beneath their fire before they were overpowered. Sick with horror and shame, Frank saw that they were undone.

And by these dogs of Kirgheez.

The air-ship was captured. They were in the hands of their worst foe, Beni Berber.

What more awful disaster could befall them. It was too dreadful to believe.

Beals came to quickly as the blow had merely stunned him. He was overwhelmed with the horror of the situation.

He and Frank were dragged into the cabin. Berber and his men began to loot the air-ship.

They spared nothing.

Every article of value or use was seized. "To the victor belong the spoils" was well applied.

The exultation of the fiend was sickening to witness. He chuckled and crowed and gloated. It was his hour of triumph.

But even in that moment Frank recovered his self-possession, and began at once to plan a way out of the difficulty.

But his wonderful inventive genius seemed to have received a terrible set back in face of this catastrophe. He seemed powerless.

For hours the Kirgheez held their orgies on board the air-ship. Everything was turned upside down.

Frank saw that there was nothing left of value save the bare hull

and the machinery. This they had not as yet defiled with their touch.

But the time was coming.

Suddenly one of them dashed into the dynamo room. He placed a hand upon one of the coils.

The result was thrilling.

It was safe to say that he never knew what happened to him. He turned one terrific somersault and lay rigid on the deck.

Startled, his companions gazed at the deadly dynamo. One of them picked up a chisel and gave it a blow.

The chisel flew out of his hands and scalped a man beside him; while it stretched him senseless on the cabin stairs.

Angry cries went up from the Kirgheez. One of them picked up a sledge hammer and might have done some serious harm but for interposition.

Berber had a vague idea of the nature of dynamos and electricity in general.

He appeared on the scene and put an end to the exploit. The others were warned to let the machinery alone.

Then Berber wandered into the pilot-house. A new idea had come to him.

He became seized with a sudden ambition to navigate the air ship himself. All sorts of thrilling possibilities occurred to him.

As master of an air ship what might not he do? What was to prevent his becoming a demi god, or mighty ruler of the entire Steppes? Certainly he could enforce any authority he desired.

So he began to monkey with the key board.

But it was a genuine thirteen puzzle to him. He could get neither head nor tail of it.

The result was that he did some pondering. Then he went out and tackled Frank Reade, Jr.

He stated his desire in a few words.

"I want you to show me how to fly your air ship," he said. "If you refuse I will kill you!"

It required but a few words for Frank to inform him that this was something which he would not do. This made the villain furious.

He argued, he cajoled, he threatened, all to no avail.

Then he went back to the keyboard. Luckily he never found the spring to the rotascopes, else he would have sent the air-ship heavenward instantaneously.

It might then have become necessary for Frank to have interferred. But for the present the young inventor chose not to do so.

Meanwhile, the Kirgheez had broken into the stores and found a case of whisky. In a very short while they had transferred this to their stomachs.

Now, everybody knows the effect of whisky upon a savage man. In a short while one of their number, crazed by the liquor, started to run amuck.

With a long knife in his hand he dashed into a crowd of his companions, laying about him right and left. A fearful riot followed.

The deck of the air-ship was bathed in blood. Two of the Kirgheez were mortally wounded before Berber could put an end to the affair.

Then he drove them all from the air-ship to sleep off the effects of their orgies on the cliff. Darkness had begun to mantle the country.

Berber himself remained in the pilot-house until late that night trying to solve the mystery of the key-board. He was baffled.

Meanwhile, the prisoners were languishing in their bonds. It was far from a pleasant outlook.

"Be me sowl!" declared Barney, "it was a bad day for me when I let them scapheens git their claws upon me!"

"Dat am jes' wha I fink, I'sh," said Pomp.

"Shure, they'll be after killin' av us yit."

"Golly! dey am all too drunk fo' dat jes' now!"

"Yis, but wait till yez see thim gittin' sober," averred Barney.

"Shure, they've no use fer us!"

"Massy Lordy! if we cud only jes' git free now, I done fink we cud skip out wif de air-ship an' leave dem."

"Begorra, let's thry all we kin!"

"A' right, I'sh!"

And the two jokers worked away at their bonds valiantly. But they were unable to break them.

Frank and Beals sat side by side securely bound. Frank had been vainly trying to conjure up a scheme for escape.

"If we could only slip these ropes," declared Beals, "there'd be a chance for us. But I can't loosen my bonds even the slightest."

"Nor I," said Frank. "Ah—they gave way a little then."

Constant straining had caused a knot to slip. Frank felt it give way.

He felt a secret thrill and kept at work. He could see freedom before him already.

Steadily and surely he drew his right hand from the rope. It was almost free when a startling thing happened.

There was a sudden click and whir from the pilot house. Then the air-ship gave a lurch.

There was a revolving sensation, then a feeling of lightness. Every one of the prisoners knew what it meant.

"Jupiter!" exclaimed Frank; "that rascal has found the rotoscope lever and the ship is flying up into space!"

"Mercy!" exclaimed Beals. "What if he cannot shut it off?"

"We shall go clear beyond the upper stratum of atmosphere and perish," declared Frank.

"The fool!" gasped Beals. "Will he allow us to do that? Speak to him, Frank! Ask him to set you free so as to stop the ship."

"Easy," replied Frank. "I am almost free now. Leave it to me."

Meanwhile Berber was astounded, and not a little alarmed at the unexpected success of his operations.

The air ship was traveling through space. He was master of it, and was alone on board with the prisoners.

But he never thought of this. So elated was he with his success that he could only rush out on deck and look back down at the earth, then rush back to study some way to check the air ship and control it.

If he could master that secret, he would be all right, as he knew; so he did not think of calling Frank to his aid.

But of a sudden the air grew chill. A wintry bitterness pervaded it; also it became difficult to breathe.

In an incredible short space frost formed on the windows and snow fell on the deck. They had plunged into a frigid atmosphere.

"Massy Lordy!" gasped Pomp, "dat fool am gwine fo' to kill de hull ob us! We'se gone chickens!"

In those rarefied heights of the atmosphere life could not be long supported. Yet no sound came from the pilot-house.

"God help us!" ejaculated Beals, and blood began to stream from his nostrils.

"All right!" cried Frank, with one mighty effort. "I'm free!"

He threw off the bonds and sprung up. His breath seemed to leave him.

How he reached the pilot-house he never knew. But he stumbled over the senseless form of Berber in the doorway.

He reached the lever and gave it a turn. Then he clung to the keyboard.

Down sank the air-ship. It required but a few moments for it to reach temperate atmosphere. Then Frank held it suspended.

His head swam and he was excessively weak. But he kept his senses.

In a few moments he was able to return to the cabin. Beals was in rather bad shape.

He had bled profusely from head and lungs, but after some effort Frank resuscitated him.

Barney and Pomp had recovered all right. Frank cut their bonds. It was a joyful moment.

They were free again.

The villain, Berber, was outwitted, and they were once more in possession of the air-ship.

To be sure it had been looted, but some of the things, particularly arms and ammunition, had been left aboard so that they were not so badly off.

But just at this moment there appeared in the doorway a gaunt form.

It was Berber.

The villain's eyes were bloodshot and his face covered with blood. He glared at his erstwhile prisoners.

When he comprehended that they had their freedom he muttered an oath and whipped out a pistol.

But Frank was too quick for him.

Quick as a flash the young inventor had his own revolver in readiness and fired. The bullet passed through the other's wrist and he instantly dropped the revolver which he held.

"Stand where you are, Berber!" cried Frank in a ringing voice, "it will be death to you if you don't!"

The wretch cowered back in the doorway and held up his hands. Frank turned to Barney and Pomp.

"Bind him!" he said sternly.

The order was obeyed and with the tables thus turned upon him Beni Berber's game was up.

Beals was soon able to go on deck, and the joy of all at this sudden change in their fortunes was great.

"We will take care not to get into such a scrape again," declared Frank. "Now all we have to do is to find Wyman and Bent and then strike for home!"

"I think I can see the prospect of success," said Beals with much satisfaction.

## CHAPTER XII.

THE END.

No attempt was made to descend that night. The air ship hung aloft until daybreak.

Then it descended a couple of miles until again right over the valley they had left some hours before.

To the surprise of all, no sign of the Kirgheez could be seen. They had decamped bag and baggage.

This was disappointing, for Frank had hoped to recover some of the effects of the air ship which they had taken with them.

But now the mystery of the disappearance of the two bicycle riders was solved.

Following the tracks of their machines, the voyagers were led to the mouth of a cavern, which extended into the mountain, they knew not how far.

Into this the bicyclists had vanished, but there were no marks of an exit.

"Perhaps there is another exit," suggested Beals, "known to them."

"I doubt it from the conformation of the cavern," said Frank.

"Where are they then?"

"Probably they are yet in there."

"Do you believe it?"

"I think it is possible."

Beals gave a cry of joy.

"Then let us call them out at once," he said. "Who has a good voice for shouting? Here Barney!"

Barney complied and filled the arches of the cavern with his rich brogue. For a time there was no reply.

Then a faint answer came.

"Hello!"

"Hilloo!" shouted Barney. "Cum out av that! It's frinds cum to foind yez!"

A distant shout was heard in response and then some time elapsed. The next time Barney called the answer was within a distance of fifty yards.

"Who are you?" came from the cavern depths.

"We are friends!" cried Beals. "Have no fear! We have come to save you! Come out!"

"We will gladly do that if you assured us that you speak the truth," was the reply.

"I will do that," cried Beals, "stay where you are and I will come to you. But wait! who are you?"

"Americans!"

"You are bicyclists?"

"Yes."

"Then you are Harold Wyman and Sam Bent."

"You know us!"

"That settles it. Come out! I am Jackson Beals, New York detective, and these men with me are Frank Reade, Jr., and Barney and Pomp. Mr. Reade is the owner of the air-ship which brought us hither."

"Air-ship? was that what we passed last night when pursued by Berber and his men?"

"It is!"

"Why, we thought it some sort of a heathen pagoda or temple or something of the sort. We saw no white men. Come on, Sam! these people are friends, for which thank Heaven!"

The next moment the two lost bicyclists on their wheels rode out of the cavern.

Their appearance was striking indeed. Pale and attenuated, they were in rags and showed rough treatment and hardship.

They had been through many thrilling episodes, and they were fortunate indeed to have escaped alive.

Their joy at finding friends was great. When Beals had told the story of the quest both boys turned to Frank Reade, Jr., and fairly embraced him.

"We owe our lives to you!" they said.

Their wheels were in bad shape, and could not have stood a much longer journey.

"We had no idea of the magnitude of the undertaking," said young Wyman, "or we never would have tried to ride across the steppes."

"I, for one, shall be glad to get home," declared Sam.

"And I," agreed Harold.

"You shall have that prayer," declared Beals; "but we have the traitor and your persecutor aboard."

"What! not Berber?" cried the boys.

"The same!"

"Whew!" cried Wyman. "I have some curiosity to see him."

"You shall!"

When Berber was confronted by the boys the effect was curious. The fellow showed his cowardice.

He broke down and begged like a whipped cur for his life. In disgust Harold finally said:

"Shut up, you fool! What do we want of your worthless life. It would be a mercy to hang you, though."

Then the voyagers retired to the deck and discussed the possible fate of the wretch. It was finally decided to set him free.

So Berber was brought out of the cabin and rudely hustled over the rail. Barney and Pomp stoned him down the mountain side.

It was the last seen of him.

"Now for home!" cried Beals, "this trip has been an enormous success."

"For which we are to be thankful," declared Frank, "the risk was great."

"Indeed, yes. But for you, these young men might never have seen home again."

The air-ship quickly mounted into the sky and a course was set for the Caspian Sea.

It was decided to return by the very route they had come. Barney put on all speed.

Rapidly the wild land of the Kirgheez was left behind. None of the voyagers looked back. All looked forward.

As for the two boys, Harold and Sam, they were happy enough. It was a pleasant thought to them that they were going home.

In due course the waters of the Caspian came into view. The air-ship floated along above this vast expanse of water for a day and night.

Then the Caucasus range came into view. Over this the air-ship passed and Frank decided to cut across the Black Sea to Constantinople and notify the American Consul of the success of the trip.

This was a well meant plan, but it would have proved a more fortunate thing for the young inventor had he kept on across Russia to the North Sea.

As the air-ship was now in Europe, the voyagers felt a degree of confidence which they could not have felt in Asia. It was the cause of a tragic incident.

The Black Sea had faded in the distance, and the air-ship was drifting over a part of picturesque Turkey.

It had been a favorite pastime to watch the little towns and hamlets as they passed below and study the peculiarities of Turkish life.

One day Barney had allowed the Pilot to descend within six hundred feet of the earth. They were passing over a little hamlet which was against the side of a hill.

"Look!" cried Beals, "the people in that town seem much excited. What can be the matter?"

"It is the air-ship!" cried young Wyman. "They are evidently afraid of us."

Indeed this seemed to be the case. To verify it a number of bullets came whistling upward.

Barney had thought of sending the air-ship higher when the disaster came.

Unseen by the voyagers, right in the side of the hill was a small fort. A cannon was mounted there, and suddenly there was a terrific boom—and then—

Crash! Zip—rip—tear! A heavy shot went smashing through the engine room. The machinery was totally demolished.

Down sank the air-ship. The rotascopes formed a sort of parachute and eased the descent.

For a moment the voyagers were too horrified to speak or act.

"Great heavens!" finally cried Beals. "We are done up, friends, and by the unspeakable Turk!"

The next moment the air-ship struck the earth.

In a jiffy it was surrounded by a mob of Turkish officers with drawn scimitars. It would have been madness to make resistance.

But Frank was very angry.

"Somebody shall pay for this outrage," he said, grimly.

The voyagers were instantly made prisoners. The air-ship was confiscated and they were marched off to a prison in the little fort.

Here they were thrown into a common cell, and left for a time to their own ruminations.

"Well, I'll be hung," muttered Beals, "to think that such a thing as this should happen in this nineteenth century! It is pretty rough."

"What are we going to do?" asked Harold and Sam.

"Perhaps they will behead us without trial, a most delightful piece of Turkish prejudice," said Beals.

"We ought to send for the American Consul," said Sam.

"And so we will," agreed Frank, "if they'll give us a chance."

At this moment the door opened, and a puffy little Turk in gold lace came in.

He glanced from one to another of the prisoners in astonishment.

"Pestel!" he exclaimed, in French, "these are English! They told me you were Armenians."

"Well, monsieur," replied Frank, "they have made a costly mis-

take. We are Americans, and claim the protection of the American flag!"

"Your passports, monsieur?"

"We do not require passports to travel in the air."

The little Turk was for a moment staggered; but a bright idea came to him.

"Allah gives us ownership of all above us to the gates of Paradise," he said. "You must have passports."

"That is a unique excuse," replied Frank. "We have not got them. We demand to see our consul!"

After some further palavering the little official departed. It was not long before the door opened, and he reappeared again with beaming face.

He held in his hand a dispatch bearing the government seal.

"You are free, messieurs," he said. "The Sultan pardons you. Here is a message from your consul at Constantinople."

They marched out of the prison with relief. The air ship, a literal wreck, lay where it had fallen.

It was obsequiously surrendered to the aerial voyagers, but Frank could only say:

"I think, friends, we will have to go home by steamer. The airship is plainly non compos."

And so it was decided. But before he left Constantinople, Frank put in a claim against the Turkish government.

The remnants of the air-ship were not worth carrying home. Frank left them where they were.

As the Turks were in the wrong in due course Frank's claim was allowed. He received a fair sum for the air-ship.

"It is a pity," said Beals; "such a beautiful invention as it was. Confound their ignorant heads!"

But Frank only smiled.

"I can duplicate it," he said.

"And will you?"

"No."

"Ahl!"

"I shall not duplicate it. I will excel it," replied the young inventor; "keep your eyes open for its successor."

"I shall be happy to see it and more happy to take another journey with you," said the detective.

"It is not impossible but that you may have a chance," replied Frank. "We will leave it to the future."

In due course our adventurers reached New York.

The boy bicyclists, Harold Wyman and Sam Bent, were joyfully welcomed back by their friends. It is safe to say that they will not attempt another such feat right away.

Plucky Jackson Beals got his fifty thousand dollars reward. He was happy in his success.

What of Frank Reade, Jr., Barney and Pomp? Of course, they returned to Readestown. Further we will not say about them, leaving it for some future tale.

[THE END.]

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